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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM -- POSITIVE NEWS IN INDONESIA

Classified By: Pol/C Joseph L. Novak, reasons 1.4(b+d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The GOI has welcomed the 2009 International Religious Freedom Report's acknowledgment of Indonesia's improved respect for religious freedom. Several recent developments underline efforts in this area: for example, Christian groups have received permission to open a new seminary and a church. In addition, in an effort to enforce zoning regulations in a neutral manner, officials have demolished a nearly completed mosque that did not obtain permits. Overall, the latest news is positive and highlights Indonesia's respect for different religious traditions despite pressure by some to bend the law to support Muslim norms. END SUMMARY.

GOI WELCOMES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

¶2. (C) The GOI is upbeat regarding the 2009 International Religious Freedom Report (IRF) chapter on Indonesia. Mission contacts welcomed language in the report demonstrating Indonesia's improved respect for religious freedom. Director Pribadi Sutiono of the Directorate of Public Diplomacy at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DEPLU) told poloff that the GOI considers the report to be "relatively comprehensive and credible." He added that the GOI had "no complaints, only compliments" with the report. Pribadi said, "Indonesia remains a multi-religious, pluralistic democracy committed to the protection of religious freedoms...the recent report works to change people's misconceptions that have remained in place since the beginning of the decade."

CHRISTIAN GROUPS ON POSITIVE END OF RECENT DECISIONS

¶3. (SBU) Several recent developments underline Indonesia's efforts to ensure religious freedom. On November 9, for example, the Arastamar Theological College (SETIA) and the Jakarta Governor's office reached a settlement regarding a new campus for the seminary. In July 2008, the Jakarta city government suddenly relocated SETIA faculty and students from their campus in East Jakarta following a melee between students and local residents (reftel). Following their forced relocation, SETIA students have been staying in an abandoned office complex where they have had intermittent access to electricity, water and sanitation facilities. The new location in West Jakarta agreed to by both sides reportedly addresses all of SETIA's current needs and provides ample growth opportunities for further campus expansion.

¶4. (SBU) Meanwhile, Christians in the West Java city of Depok won a court battle restoring their building permit which allows parishioners to resume church construction. Following protests by Muslim hard-liners, the mayor of Depok unilaterally decided to revoke the church's building permit. Members of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP), a Christian group, filed suit against the Mayor's decision. A

three-judge panel ruled that HKBP members legally obtained a construction permit under existing regulations and the mayor had no legal authority to cancel the permit. The city said that it intends to appeal.

15. (SBU) Re the Depok situation, obtaining authorization to build a house of worship can be a cumbersome process and places burdens on religious organizations. Under Indonesian laws, religious groups that seek to build a place of worship must obtain signatures from 90 members of their congregation.

In addition to this, groups must obtain 60 signatures from persons of other religious groups in the surrounding community and request approval from the local religious affairs office, formally called the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB). Despite the bureaucratic hurdles religious freedom activists told poloff that FKUB decisions were usually credible and transparent. However, FKUB occasionally denies building permits based on concerns raised by the surrounding community.

APPLYING RULES IN A NEUTRAL MANNER

16. (SBU) Building regulations for houses of worship are applied across the religious spectrum, not just to Christian churches. A nearly completed mosque in East Jakarta, for example, was recently torn down because the construction company had failed to obtain a legal building permit. City officials said they wanted to ensure that all construction projects were in accordance with existing zoning regulations, adding that the planned mosque was built on land designated as green space. Although the land developer had already set aside space for a mosque, local residents rejected the

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location and took steps to build the mosque at a place of their own choosing. Residents accepted the city's decision and said they would begin construction of a new mosque on the allocated space.

POSITIVE NEWS, BUT VIGILANCE NEEDED

17. (C) Overall, the latest news is positive and highlights Indonesia's respect for different religious traditions. That said, there is pressure by some to bend the law to support Muslim norms. This is the case in Aceh, for example, where a recent law seeks to enforce Sharia provisions. In addition, while the situation is generally positive in Indonesia's urban areas, religious freedom questions do pop up from time to time in rural areas where local Muslims are the vast majority and sometimes object to Christian activity. This underlines the point that while Indonesia's record is a good one, authorities must exercise constant vigilance.

HUME